



## OUR HOUSES, OUR CASTLES, OUR HOMES

**Before** After 16 years, the house and garden could do with a helping hand. The hallway is tired looking and the family room is cramped and in need of some space-saving ideas. The shed is full to the brim and the garden is a patch of turf that's seen better days and offers no room to entertain Marta and Adolfo's many guests.

**After** The hall and family room have been made over with lovely light colours, new lighting and blinds and beautiful new furniture and appliances. The kitchen has been freshened up with a new colour scheme. Adolfo's workshed has

been completely transformed with unique storage and space-saving ideas. And it's party central outside – the team has created a tropical paradise, complete with Latin-inspired cabana and pool entertaining area that we're sure will see many parties and hot salsa dancing nights.

*Extract from the Real Estate and Renovation page of ninemsn for the television program Renovation Rescue*  
<http://sites.ninemsn.com.au/minisite/property/renorescue/default.asp>

'Our houses' really are 'our castles'. We seek warmth, protection, comfort, and a bit of luxury. A good house is about having a place to call our own. When it works well, it meets our needs and helps us to feel secure. So we build, purchase, discard, renovate, purchase – changing houses, redesigning spaces, buying appliances, furniture, technology, furnishings, toys, adding to our houses over the years to create our very own 'home' – a physical environment that is perfect for ourselves and our families.

### BUT WHAT ABOUT THAT 'OTHER' ENVIRONMENT?

Access to shelter is a basic human need – and 'a home' is a human right. People live in all kinds of homes – an urban apartment, a flat near the city, a caravan, a house in the suburbs, a farm in the regions, or a hostel. 'We' includes people all around Australia and all around the globe, so access to adequate housing is not always a given. 'Our homes' range from absolute luxury for the rich to nothing for the homeless.

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights enshrines the right of every person to adequate housing and the continuous improvement of living conditions. The United Nations Human Habitat Agenda was passed by 171 countries in 1996. Among the commitments was the following:

the goal of improving living and working conditions on an equitable and sustainable basis, so that everyone will have adequate shelter that is healthy, safe, secure, accessible and affordable and that includes basic services, facilities and amenities, and will enjoy freedom from discrimination in housing and legal security of tenure.<sup>1</sup>

For most Australians, the basic rights of shelter are met. We live in comfort and security. Creating and maintaining our homes, and our lifestyles, seems pretty natural to most of us. We work hard to earn money to provide for ourselves, and often also for our partners or children, so naturally we spend our money on a myriad of things to meet our needs. In our homes, for our food, warmth, education and entertainment – amongst many other needs – we have our fridges, heaters, books, computers, and televisions – amongst many other things.

In fact, many of us live in so much comfort (relative to the rest of the world's population) that we can easily confuse our needs with our wants. We are high maintenance consumers, influenced by media advertising and societal expectations. Many of us 'need' the latest stainless steel fridge with ice-maker and water-filter, a home espresso machine, a computer and a laptop and as well as a 'decent' home entertainment system.

But whether we have the latest fridge or one that is twenty years old, whether we have one bathroom or three, the fact remains – there are personal, communal and ecological consequences to the way we choose to live.

<sup>1</sup> UN-Habitat website [http://www.unchs.org/declarations/habitat\\_agenda.asp](http://www.unchs.org/declarations/habitat_agenda.asp)

**Truth** While our homes exist within the boundaries of our properties, the impacts they have on the environment extend far beyond...

“Australia’s 7 million households collectively contribute one fifth of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions, emitting an average of 15 tonnes of greenhouse gases each year.”<sup>2</sup>

What costs does your home incur? on the environment? on others? on yourself?

## BUT ITS OK TO HAVE A NICE HOME ISN'T IT?

Yes, of course it is!

Homes are more than just shelter, they are not just roofs over our heads. They contribute to people’s security, and their sense of dignity and identity. Once we have a home, it is natural to try to make it into the best place we can.

What is important to remember is that building and maintaining our home environment draws on resources, both human and natural, and our consumption can be a form of violence causing environmental damage and waste. Polluted air and waterways, loss of natural habitats (including green areas for human enjoyment), harm to wildlife and animals, and the continuing need for places to store our waste are both immediate problems and long-term dilemmas.

We are responsible for the impact of our lifestyles on the community of creation – other people, animals, plants, water, and all the rest of the natural environment. The way we choose to live will always impact on creation – humans are part of creation, it could not be any other way. However, our ‘footprint’ on this planet is becoming very large indeed – ecological deterioration, environmental decay, human over-population and poverty, are all overt costs of human habitation.

Securing our lifestyle involves making choices about what matters to us. What type of a lifestyle are we securing? Is a particular lifestyle important to us, and why? Within our contemporary Australian society, lifestyles are often maintained at a high level, supported by high cost consumerism. Instead of considering what we need to live well, we often purchase goods, food and services far beyond what we need – excess rather than what is sufficient.

## ‘HOME’ CAN INCLUDE BOTH ‘OUR HOUSES’ AND ‘GOD’S CREATION’

God created everything on earth. Humans were created in relationship with all of creation - the plants, animals, water, air and soil. The Creation story emphasises community and interdependence.

**Community** God created earth as an interconnected community of mutual dependence for life and its continuation. The human community cohabits earth with animals and the natural environment. Our lives are dependent upon the natural environment, just like animal’s lives are. And, just like animals, we impact upon and alter the natural environment throughout our lives. The ways in which we impact upon and alter the natural environment can be positive and life-sustaining, or they can be destructive and life-destroying. As Christians, we are responsible for compassionate, just and peaceful habitation, which acknowledges the needs of all to secure and sustainable living.

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. (Psalm 24: 1-2)

The Christian story, as recorded in the biblical text, is a story of abundance. It is this abundance that we can celebrate – abundance of life, abundance of hope, and abundance of what we have. When we acknowledge that we have much, we also must acknowledge our responsibility – for generosity, sharing, giving, getting involved, whether with family, other people, our communities, or the environment in which we live.

The opposite of abundance is scarcity where we clamber for more, where we are never content, and where others are seen as a threat to what we already have. It is this sense of scarcity that can lead to indifference about where we live and whom we live with.



<sup>2</sup> Australian Conservation Foundation website <http://www.acfonline.org.au/asp/pages/document.asp?IdDoc= 482>

An abundant life for humanity is lived within creation. Recognition of our interconnectedness with each other and the natural environment necessitates a commitment to respect and nurturing of all living things. We cannot afford to be indifferent, we must instead understand our responsibility as cohabiters of the planet to live sustainable lifestyles in order to protect the future of the planet (and of humanity!).

Security where we live, as members of the global community, can be understood in terms of this web of interdependence. It is our responsibility to work for peace, equality and safety for all living things, precisely because of our membership within this community, and the respect and integrity that should be afforded to all.

**Mercy** Central to a just life for all living things are spiritual values – values which arise out of God’s grace and mercy to guide our living, our response to injustice, and our attempts to act fairly. We need to reincorporate spiritual values in the ways we act out our lives.

Consider these guiding spiritual values for security for all creation:

- **Gratitude** – Thankfulness or gratitude to God for the gift of life we experience is important to our spiritual well being. When considering how to use our resources, both personally and as a community, an understanding of our global interconnectedness allows us to be thankful for human and natural communities and gives us a reason to nurture rather than destroy these gifts.
- **Humility** – Our place is not as powerful leader, but as one part of the whole global community, and we acknowledge our dependence on other parts of it.
- **Sufficiency** – A commitment to ways of living that are simpler, using only what is needed, can promote well-being and even enable environmental recovery.
- **Faith** – Hoping for a future of sustainability and equity, imagining a world where resources are distributed fairly, where all living things have sufficient to live a quality life, where safety is expected.... faith in what is hoped for, but not-yet-real, faith that is energising, faith that sustains.

## DOES YOUR HOME INCLUDE GOD’S CREATION?

**Justice** The call to act justly is just as important ecologically as it is socially and because all God’s creation is connected, true justice will be justice for humans and for the earth.

The Australian Consumers’ Association lists some simple but effective ways we can reduce the impact of our homes on the environment.<sup>3</sup> They include:

- using natural gas, or solar energy for heating and cooking, rather than electricity which uses valuable fossil fuels and produces carbon dioxide;
- installing roof insulation to reduce demand on heating and cooling systems;
- installing a water-efficient showerhead;
- buying appliances with high energy ratings;
- walking, cycling or catching public transport as much as possible;
- reducing our use of plastic shopping bags;
- reducing, reusing and recycling our waste.

**Undertake an Environmental Cost Inventory of your house, or your church. List areas, appliances and activities that impact on the natural environment, the effect of that impact, and actions you can take to minimise the impact.**



<sup>3</sup> Choice website <http://www.choice.com.au/viewArticle.aspx?id=101544&catId=100167&tid=100008&p=1>



## FINDING OUT MORE

Read some biblical theological reflections

- *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, edited by Norman C Habel Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000
- *Spiritual Values for Earth Community* by David G. Hallman, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000

**Get involved** by examining what you can do to make a difference in your home by getting *Global Warming – Cool It!* a home guide to reducing energy costs and greenhouse gases, available from the Australian Greenhouse Office - <http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/gwci/> or phone (02) 6274 1888

**Get involved** in the 2004 Year of the Built Environment in Australia. This is a collaborative celebration by government, industry, environmental and community groups to raise awareness in the Australian community about the built environment. See what's happening in your local area, or plan and run an event yourself – check out all the relevant information on the website, [www.builtenvironment2004.org.au](http://www.builtenvironment2004.org.au).